UNITED NATIONS **A**

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/C.5/51/56
5 August 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Fifty-first session
FIFTH COMMITTEE
Agenda item 118

PATTERN OF CONFERENCES

Access to the optical disk system

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In section C, paragraph 4, of its resolution 51/211 of 18 December 1996, on the pattern of conferences, the General Assembly strongly urged the Secretary-General, as a matter of priority, to provide proposals to the Fifth Committee, at the first part of the resumed fifty-first session, in accordance with paragraph 3 of Assembly resolution 50/206 D of 23 December 1995, on facilitating access by developing countries to the optical disk system in all six official languages, taking into account the possible savings from reduced reproduction and distribution costs.

2. Since the establishment of the optical disk system in 1993, there has been an exponential growth in the number of users, first among the permanent and observer missions to the United Nations at Headquarters and then in government capitals. At the end of 1996, there were more than 2,300 users worldwide, with user availability to all Member States. Available on-line, seven days per week, are:

(a) All United Nations parliamentary documentation since 1993 in all official languages;

(b) Resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Trusteeship Council since 1946;

(c) A number of official records of the four main bodies since 1946;

(d) Administrative issuances of the Secretariat.

3. In November 1996, access by Internet users to the optical disk system became available when a Web server interface was put into operation at

Headquarters. By 30 June 1997, all permanent missions had been connected to the Internet and had access through it to documents stored on the optical disk system, both for their own use and for electronic transmission to capitals.

4. It is planned to place a second Web server on-line in New York and refinements are under way to the access programme to facilitate the interface. Training in the use of the optical disk system is provided both on-line and directly to the community of users.

5. The present capacity of the system has made it possible to achieve two primary objectives: providing for a more economical and secure means for storing documents and reducing production of documents in hard copy.

6. Since documents in the optical disk system can be printed on demand to meet unforeseen requests for limited numbers of copies, stocks of documents in hard copy kept in storage at Headquarters have been reduced by half. Access to the system by internal Secretariat users has also made it possible to restrict substantially the internal distribution of documentation.

7. This streamlining of printruns for stock and internal distribution resulted in a 13 per cent reduction in the number of pages printed in New York in 1996, compared with 1995, and has allowed for staff reductions and lower expenditures in supplies.

8. Recently, the Distribution Section of Conference Services conducted a survey among permanent and observer missions in New York aimed at establishing new hard-copy document requirements taking into account electronic availability on the optical disk system. With a response rate of 55 per cent, the results indicate an overall reduction of 14 per cent in the number of copies missions wish to have distributed to them on issuance. This translates into a 5.2 per cent reduction in the total number of copies of parliamentary documents that must be printed.

9. It may be useful to note that responses from permanent missions varied widely. For example, two major recipients of documents requested that the number of copies supplied to them be reduced by 26 and 33 per cent, respectively, while a third made no changes to its order.

10. On the other hand, the availability of documents in the optical disk system and access to them via the Internet have not had a discernible effect on the number of copies of documents requested by delegations in conference rooms and at document counters at Headquarters.

11. While streamlining printruns, stocks and distribution patterns, the Secretariat has been careful to observe the approach taken in paragraph 3 of resolution 51/211 C, in which the General Assembly decided that, in the absence of an Assembly decision to the contrary, the use of such technologies as the optical disk system and the Internet should not constitute an alternative to traditional documents.

12. At present, optical disk access is provided free of charge to its users. These users are entirely governmental or intergovernmental entities. In theory,

the same access could be provided to many more governmental entities and in fact the Secretariat encourages all Member States to take advantage of access to the system. In practice, four major factors determine accessibility:

(a) Infrastructure. The optical disk system is accessible either via the Internet or through special, direct integrated services digital network (ISDN) telephone lines. Both require an infrastructure sufficiently developed to ensure support for the communications systems that would guarantee continuous and unimpeded access;

(b) Hardware and software availability and cost. Despite the claim that the Internet is free, it is not. Hardware, software, memory and networks are all expensive. There are commercial costs associated with providing in-country governmental access, even where appropriate communications infrastructures exist;

(c) Capacity of the system. The more users that exist for the system, the more hardware and software capacity is required within the United Nations. Otherwise, users may have to queue for intolerable lengths of time or be denied access. The Organization could expand its capacity to accommodate a large number of users, but this would require further capital expenditures that would not necessarily be offset by savings in other forms of document reproduction or distribution;

(d) Support for the system. At present, the staff and contractors who support the system and the users are fully occupied. While there is no direct correlation between the number of users and the number of support staff required, that is, more users may be accommodated without additional staff being needed, at some point expansion of the system would demand more staff support. Financing for this staff could not realistically be anticipated from the release of funds because of diminished document reproduction and distribution.

13. CD-ROM technology is considered to be a very economical supplemental manner by which the optical disk database could be distributed to interested users around the world. A facility to produce CD-ROMs directly from the optical disk system has been introduced and the first prototypes of CD-ROMs are expected to be ready in 1997. The CD-ROMs will have the same search and retrieval interface as the optical disk on the Internet. Users may then choose between one or the other to access United Nations documents without having to learn new functions or procedures.

14. Work on the development of a policy for the further expansion of the optical disk system is in progress. The project will be part of the Secretary-General's strategy to create an "electronic United Nations", announced in his report entitled "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform" (A/51/950, paras. 244-247). The establishment and development of the optical disk system and the use of the Internet to offer electronic access to documents and to the United Nations World Wide Web site are the foundation of a plan to offer information of higher quality, at a lower unit cost, to a vastly broader audience in every Member State.

15. In developing a specific policy for the optical disk system, the Secretary-General will be guided by the dual objectives of achieving further efficiencies in the dissemination of information and maintaining the most appropriate mix of electronic and hard-copy documentation services. Such a mix must, firstly, provide the means for Member States to participate effectively and in the official language of their choice in the work of intergovernmental bodies and, secondly, address the needs of groups in all countries that have been traditional recipients of information on the Organization and its activities, in particular non-governmental organizations, the press, libraries and educational and research institutions.

16. In this connection, the Secretary-General would appreciate the views of Member States and other current and potential users. Normative guidance will be expected from the General Assembly and technical and financial proposals, as required, will be submitted for its consideration.

ANNEX

List of States whose capitals have access to the optical disk system[a]

Algeria
Antigua and Barbuda
Argentina (also Foreign Ministry)
Armenia
Australia (also Foreign Ministry)
Austria (also Foreign Ministry)
Bangladesh (also Foreign Ministry)
Barbados (also Foreign Ministry
Belgium
Brunei Darussalam
Bulgaria (also Foreign Ministry)
Burkina Faso (also Foreign Ministry)
Canada (also Foreign Ministry)
Cape Verde
Chile
Colombia
Croatia
Cuba (also Foreign Ministry)
Czech Republic
Djibouti
Ecuador (also Foreign Ministry)
Egypt (also Foreign Ministry)
El Salvador (also Foreign Ministry)
Ethiopia (also Foreign Ministry)
Finland (also Foreign Ministry)
France
Germany (also Foreign Ministry)
Ghana
Greece
Guatemala
Haiti
Hungary (also Foreign Ministry)
India (also Foreign Ministry)
Indonesia (Geneva) (also Foreign Ministry)
Iran (Islamic Republic of) (also Foreign Ministry)
Israel
Italy (also Foreign Ministry)
Jamaica
Japan
Jordan (also Foreign Ministry)
Kazakhstan
Kenya
Kyrgyzstan (also Foreign Ministry)
Lao People's Democratic Republic
Lebanon (also Foreign Ministry)
Lesotho
Liechtenstein
Lithuania (also Foreign Ministry)
Malawi (also Foreign Ministry)
Malaysia
Malta
Mauritius
Mexico (also Foreign Ministry)
Mongolia (also Foreign Ministry)
Morocco (also Foreign Ministry)
Myanmar
Namibia
Nepal
Netherlands (also Foreign Ministry)
New Zealand (also Foreign Ministry)
Norway (also Foreign Ministry)
Pakistan (also Foreign Ministry)
Panama (also Foreign Ministry)
Papua New Guinea (also Foreign Ministry)
Paraguay
Peru
Philippines (also Foreign Ministry)
Poland (also Foreign Ministry)
Qatar
Romania
Russian Federation (also Foreign Ministry)
San Marino (also Foreign Ministry)
Saudi Arabia (also Foreign Ministry)
Singapore
Slovakia
Solomon Islands
South Africa (also Foreign Ministry)
Swaziland (also Foreign Ministry)
Sweden
Switzerland (also Foreign Ministry)
Thailand
Togo
Trinidad and Tobago (also Foreign Ministry)

[a] All permanent missions have access to the optical disk system.

Turkey
Ukraine (also Foreign Ministry)
United Arab Emirates
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (also Foreign Ministry)
United Republic of Tanzania
United States of America (also Foreign Ministry)
Uzbekistan
Venezuela
Yugoslavia (also Foreign Ministry)